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Executive Summary

Building for Better Democracy

Final Report On the Illinois #CivicsIsBack
Civic Education Initiative

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Introduction

Since the signing of House Bill 4025 by then Illinois-Governor Bruce Rauner in August 2015, CIRCLE at Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life and the #CivicsIsBack team at the McCormick Foundation in Chicago have worked together to evaluate the progress of HB 4025's implementation in a large and diverse state. CIRCLE served as an evaluation partner focusing on efforts outside of the Chicago Public School system, but with a wide-ranging lens to understand major shifts in the landscape of Illinois civic education.

Our evaluation results clearly indicate that Illinois' #CivicsIsBack initiative overall has been a resounding success. Because research and evaluation have been an integral part of this effort, our partnership over the past three-and-half years produced numerous lessons that already serve other districts and states that are aiming to produce Illinois' level of success. In addition, we examined the impact of the efforts by different types of stakeholders with direct inputs from teachers, mentors, and other partners and have made recommendations for areas of improvements. Finally, our evaluation looked to the future of Illinois Civic Education and what lessons we can glean for Illinois and other states that are hoping to develop a sustainable effort and made early recommendations for ensuring a sustainable future.

Here we summarize the salient points from the report by each section.

Major Themes

The report uses "The New Chicago School"¹ **theoretical framework** to define the elements in which HB 4025 triggered waves of changes in the Illinois Civics ecosystem. These elements- the *law*, the *market* (e.g., supply and demand for civic learning training and resources), the *norms* (e.g., how educators and other stakeholders believe and talk about the "new" Civics), and the "*architecture*" (e.g., systemic barriers and challenges to building strong teacher capacity)

¹Lessig, Lawrence. (1998). The New Chicago School. The Journal of Legal Studies. 27. 661-91. 10.1086/468039.

explain how HB 4025 directly and indirectly influenced educators and other stakeholders and ultimately, the landscape of civic education from ground up over time.

From the beginning, the Illinois HB 4025 initiative had a three-year implementation plan including intense investment in the time frame accompanied by ongoing monitoring and evaluation. We likened Illinois' policy implementation model to that of a nurturing gardener that works to bring about a major change in (the Civic Education) landscape from ground up, *by seeding champions, demonstrating use, and fertilizing judiciously with training, support, resources, and connections* . While **Year 1 and Year 2** focused on **"seeding" and "growing" teacher mentors and teacher capacity and administrator buy-in** by investing in direct training, resources, and outreach, **Year 3 and thereafter** had a **strong focus on refining the systems** that produce and influence teaching and learning of Civics to ensure that civic learning in Illinois, no matter where students live, will be grounded in the K-12 Social Science standards and supported by evidence-based practices embedded in HB 4025. Coming back to our gardener analogy, we believe that the implementation is now in the phase in which the soil is fertile and capable of producing strong seedlings and even other flowers to bloom without intensive involvement of the gardeners. It is not to say that "the garden" needs no care. But rather, it has built up a healthy ecosystem that benefits from responsive and thoughtful stewardship.

Impact of HB4025 over the Last Three Years:

Our research findings show overwhelmingly positive statistics on implementation efforts and teacher motivation to shift practice and comply with the law. The law's transformative impact has been largely on mentors and stakeholders that experienced a paradigm shift in how they approach civics teaching and learning across the state.

For **mentors**, the shift in teaching practice and leadership was a powerful tool for self-development as a teacher and to help other teachers learn and grow. Mentors also really valued their own cohort and the professional conversations and ideas they exchanged with each other and lead mentor, Mary Ellen Daneels. Many **teachers** mentioned these mentors acted as a guide for learning the best practices, clarified the state civics standards, provided a "wealth of

information” including professional development (PD) opportunities as well as “accountability and support in regional implementation.” For **partners**, a compelling vision and support to a larger agenda than their organizational vision and to work with teachers across the breadth of the state with very different perceptions and needs was eye-opening and helped expand their vision and mission as well. The impact on **students** was quite phenomenal where an overwhelming majority of the teachers say their students demonstrated increased understanding (78%) and increased engagement levels (83%). This was also corroborated by our interviews with mentors and partners who repeatedly remarked the powerful impact of students discovering they have a voice.

Assessment of the #CivicsIsBack Policy Implementation Model

The McCormick Foundation’s vision of #CivicsIsBack initiative was to improve student civic learning outcomes by shifting teaching practice. Since HB 4025 is a high school Civics mandate, the key implementer of the endeavor were high school teachers who were supported in changing teaching practice through peer teacher mentors, a lead mentor and master teacher Mary Ellen, and a support system of funding, personnel, and resources through McCormick Foundation.

The **primary strength of the model** is that it created a grassroots movement for transforming teaching practice in high school civics and enlisted a corps of teachers to be role models and experts to help other teachers. It was **extremely effective to use teachers as peer mentors** as “teachers trust teachers” and can empathize and encourage other teachers. Additionally, choosing local teachers in different regions of the state helped with culturally responsive teaching and understanding. The other critical factor was the **high-quality and personalized PD was provided at no-cost** in local districts across the state that created a baseline of equitable access to PD and capacity building that many social studies teachers had rarely received in their career. This was one of the **key elements in shifting teaching practice where research-based, experiential, scaffolded, and personalized training and support** (including logistical and financial) was given to teachers. In addition, **prescribing best-practice instructional strategies in the law gave clear direction to teachers and districts on the “how”**

and “why” of shifting civics teaching practice and was dubbed as a “gateway drug to teachers” to learn and grow. The Illinois Civics team itself constituted a remarkable group of current and former civics teachers that thoughtfully planned the initiative and its roll out and **created a movement of change in civics education across the state through strategic partnerships and innovative PD. McCormick Foundation was the anchor institution** as a one-stop shop for information, convening of mentors and partners, and a source of expertise and guidance. As a result, the initiative maintained a strong and unified presence to direct change.

The **gaps and challenges in implementation** mainly arise from how hard it is to implement systems change in a short period of three years. In the backdrop of an intense implementation plan, there was **capacity overload** on both the **mentors** who already had their plates full as full-time teachers and on the **lead mentor**, Mary Ellen, who single-handedly planned and provided much of the PD by traveling to different regions in the state and collaborating with PD providers and institutional partners. While mentors did provide a strong sense of buy-in and concrete support, **some mentors struggled to produce effective communication** and interactions with teachers. Teachers and stakeholders also suggested that the Illinois Civics team should have **focused on administrators’ buy-in earlier** on in the process to support teachers and convey clearer roles envisioned for different stakeholders, PD providers, and institutional partners. Some interviewees noted that **more explicit focus on equity** given diverse students’ needs would improve the initiative, meaning that more focus was needed to promote the use of culturally-responsive pedagogy in conjunction with the prescribed practices to ensure that students of all backgrounds benefit equally from the initiative.

Sustainability and Applicability of the Illinois Model

Illinois’ implementation strategies rely heavily on **teachers’ ability to master the new pedagogies and integrate them into how they teach Civics every day and in the future**. Put another way, Illinois invested heavily in existing local assets which will remain in place, such as practicing teachers, regional mentors, Regional Offices of Education, and changing hearts as well as skills. That is why much investment went to training and supporting in-service teachers

as they gain skills and positive dispositions toward using proven practices, and steps have been taken to prepare pre-service teachers in a way that aligns well with the new law and standards. After three years of efforts, at least half of the teachers feel comfortable incorporating current and controversial issue discussions in the classroom (55%) and simulations of democratic processes (50%). Many teachers struggled to understand and integrate service learning for informed action since the legislation and standards were drafted. However, it is through the Illinois Civics team efforts that many teachers (43%) now understand what informed action service learning can look like in the classroom--53% of teachers still find integrating service learning "extremely challenging" and "very challenging."

For high school **teachers**, support and commitment to implementation of the civics course and alignment to the new social standards came **most strongly from the people they work and rely closely on in their network**, starting from their social studies coordinator or department head, their school principal, peer teachers in their school, and to the district superintendent. For teacher **mentors**, the **strongest allies and champions were other mentors in the program and the support network of these teacher mentors and the Illinois Civics team**. For **stakeholders**, the allies and support networks were mostly other teachers that supported and endorsed their work. Networking and collaborating with other PD providers or institutional partners also helped expand and support their work.

Looking Back, Looking Forward & Recommendations

In our final interviews, we asked interviewees to reflect on the community's efforts in the past few years. Our interviewees saw the importance of community coming together, namely, the funding community to provide resources, the McCormick Foundation team's leadership both as a funder and as a strategic leader, embrace of geographical and cultural diversity within the state, and the authentic value and respect given to teachers as the unique reasons for HB 4025 successful implementation and ingredients other states can look at.

The five main **contributing factors to Illinois' success are (1) comprehensive approach to civics teaching and capacity-building** by building layers of support to help teachers access PD

and focus on administrative buy-in; **(2) growing capacity and dispositions through empathy and encouragement** as the IL Civics Team is led by current and former teachers that understood the challenges teachers faced and supported them; **(3) the McCormick Foundation kept an eye on systems change** parallel to implementation such as working with the Teacher Pipeline Taskforce, the passing of the Middle School Civics Bill and micro-credentialing; **(4) selecting the right leadership for the context** and garnered bipartisan support from diverse stakeholders for the bill and placed teachers in key leadership role that other teachers trusted; **(5) early and strong commitment to pockets of excellence** that could be used as scalable models of success such the Democracy Schools Initiative and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) programs.

Although we consider the Illinois High School Civics initiative to be exceptionally successful, especially this early, in bringing equality in access to Civics, it still has **challenges**. Student surveys showed that students of color are showing lower levels of civic dispositions and behavioral intent, and fifty percent of high schools were still struggling to provide adequate PD to their teachers. Some of the recommendations CIRCLE provides from experience and expertise is to **(1) continue to support teachers through scaffolded PD and cross-disciplinary civics teaching** such incorporating it through ELA, STEM, and SEL initiatives; **(2) value and nurture the mentor community** in the coming years; **(3) rely on (and support, if possible) talented partners to carry the torch** as they learned a lot during the initiative and have the incentive to carry it forward.

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CIRCLE (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) is a nonpartisan, independent, academic research center that studies young people in politics and presents detailed data on young voters in all 50 states. CIRCLE is part of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University.

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